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AUTHOR Lewin, Philip
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ABSTRACT

Objectivity is frequently described as a model of "objectivism" or transparent observation of an unproblematically given external world conducted by a completely neutral observer. However desirable objectivism is in theory, the presuppositions it makes in favor of a disembodied and decontextualized cogito, and against the inclusion of the intersubjective life-world and the affect render it impossible in practice. To the extent objectivity relies on a model of objectivism, it is itself delegitimized. In contrast to objectivism, a more legitimate model may be that in which objectivity is understood as an act of passionate appropriation, in which a committed approach to a phenomenon clarifies that which is pre-reflectively anticipated; thus the cogito is re-embedded in that which supports it. Both the transparency of the phenomenon and the neutrality of the observer are intentionally relinquished in favor of their circumspectful reincorporation into empirical inquiry. This model seeks to re-integrate the life-world and the affect, without reintroducing the willful distortions of an unbridled subjectivity. Still, while in this model objectivity becomes impossible, it also becomes fallible. Fourteen references are listed. (AEM)

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OBJECTIVITY AS PASSIONATE APPROPRIATION

Philip Lewin

Liberal Studies Center, Clarkson University

Potsdam, New York 13676

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Philip Lewin
Liberal Studies Center, Clarkson University
Potsdam, New York 13676

ABSTRACT

Objectivity is frequently spoken of in terms of a model of "objectivism," or transparent observation of an unproblematically given external world, conducted by a completely neutral observer. In this paper, I try to reveal the unwarranted presuppositions which objectivism makes in favor of a disembodied and decontextualized cogito, and against the inclusion of the intersubjective life-world and the affect. However desirable objectivism is in theory, these presuppositions render it impossible in practice. To the extent objectivity relies on a model of objectivism, it is itself delegitimized.

In contrast to objectivism, I propose a model in which objectivity is understood as an act of passionate appropriation, in which a committed approach to a phenomenon clarifies that which is pre-reflectively anticipated. Thus the cogito is re-embedded in that which supports it. Both the transparency of the phenomenon and the neutrality of the observer are intentionally relinquished in favor of their circumspectful reincorporation into empirical inquiry. This model seeks to re-integrate the life-world and the affect, without re-introducing the willful distortions of an unbridled subjectivity. Still, while in this model objectivity becomes possible, it also becomes fallible.

Objectivity as Passionate Appropriation

Philip Lewin
Liberal Studies Center, Clarkson University
Potsdam, New York 13676

There are two issues concerning the notion of objectivity I wish to discuss with you. The first concerns objectivity understood as an act of appropriation; the second specifies a manner of appropriating, namely passionately. I will try to clarify these two ideas by opposing them to a more familiar though less adequate conception of objectivity, that of decontextualized observation, which I will call "objectivism."

I. Objectivity as appropriation

Let me begin with an anecdote. I offer an undergraduate elective in the philosophy of science at a technologically-oriented university. My students are rarely philosophers, but most of them have considerable aptitude and background in engineering and the physical sciences. Some of them already have patents in their name; others hold copyrights for various software programs. While most are unreflective about how science does what it does, many are fairly sophisticated in doing it.

Very early in the semester, I ask these students to write a statement on their understanding of the meaning and possibility of objectivity. When I first began to teach the course, I naively assumed them to be "closet positivists." And indeed, they lived up to my expectations--at least in part. Let me quote one student, who I will call Matt, whose ideas are typical of the main line of thinking held by many of these students:

> Being objective means acting without bias, dealing with what is presented to you rather than with thoughts or feelings. To be objective in the purest sense of the word is impossible unless you are a newborn baby. This is because as one grows, one gathers information and formulates feelings about certain actions, individuals, religions, etc....Though one cannot be totally objective, one can try. To be objective one must disregard <u>all</u> of their own morals, ideas, feelings, prejudices, etc. One must act solely on the information that is presented and/or observed.

There are two tendencies in this response which exist almost in diametrical opposition to one another. The first (which conformed to my expectations) is that objectivity is a condition that allows for the possibility of a trans-personal knowledge, knowledge undistorted by bias. The second (that did not) is that it is impossible, that only newborn babes are truly objective, and that for the rest of us insofar as we have--and note this list well--"morals, ideas, feelings" as well as the more obviously suspect "prejudices", we fall short of this ideal to a greater or lesser degree.

I find this response (and many others I receive that are similar to it) to be extremely interesting. On the one hand, it implicitly affirms the vision of logical empiricism, and with a vengeance. It offers as a transcendental condition for acquiring knowledge a state no human could ever achieve; a perfectly neutral, even naive, observer, god-like in impartiality, machine-like in attention to detail. Such a knowing is what I mean by "objectivism." Objectivism shuns not only the usual empiricist litany of offenses--bias, emotions, feelings--but those tacitly held conditions of knowing without which one hardly knows what one would want to know for--ethics, affect, all prior knowledge. Correlatively, having disembedded knowledge from any human interest, it quite appropriately concludes such a condition to

be impossible.

Of course, Matt may only be reflecting the zeitgeist, with its emphasis on relativism. And it is certainly true that someone may demonstrate considerable competence in an activity without necessarily being self-aware how they do it. Still, I cannot help but feel that when skilled practitioners of a field possess severely muddled assumptions about how and why their field functions, something is amiss. For the kind of confusion evidenced by Matt could be amplified by a list of parallel confusions present much more widely in our culture concerning the role and status of science, and correspondingly, our notions of objectivity. For example, is science to be thought of as providing universal, trans-cultural knowledge, applicable to all humans in all times and places; or is it specific to a particular technological and social infra-structure, culture-specific, and even gender-specific? Does science, in some way, "mirror" nature, revealing the "real," that is, essential ontological structures of the world; or is science primarily a sophisticated instrumentality for achieving limited human ends? Does the accumulation of scientific knowledge within disciplines indicate "progress," in the sense of both deepening our understanding and also bettering the quality of human life; or is this accumulation simply domain- or research community-specific, reflecting an overall increase of information but, precisely because it is community-specific, offering no further purchase on more general human concerns? Has our increased knowledge of information-management and the computer sciences made us wiser? our increased understanding of medicine less disease-ridden? our advances in cognitive science and neuropsychology any more sane?

Certainly these questions are not new. But our continuing in-

ability to resolve them indicates that they reflect fundamental tensions in how we, in the west, conceive the world. These tensions are not simply the consequence of conceptual muddle-headedness, but are aporia at the core of our thinking. They delimit our condition as knowers. In part, they reflect a lingering fascination with empiricist epistemology and the ideological supremacy of western thought, both the positive ideal of certain knowledge and the reluctance to subject our praxis to critical scrutiny. In turn, this willed effort not to see ourselves clearly supports the myth of objectivism by assuming the epistemological status of the observation to be unproblematic. The position I would argue for in contrast is that while objective descriptions and judgments are not only possible but are regularly made, objectivism, as a model to describe objectivity, is itself incoherent.

The presupposition with which objectivism rises and falls is that observation is transparent, that it is possible to perceive without also apperceiving. The tenacity of this position is all the more remarkable given its repeated refutation by the actual practice of scientists. The work of Kuhn and Lakatos, in particular, on the conduct of science through paradigms and research programs has provided an explicit formulation of its social practice, and has inspired a broad re-examination of the ways in which science is a community activity. We have become more conscious of how scientists are educated within particular traditions, disciplinary matrices of theory, method, and research strategy, centered around a few key exemplars which embody the central assumptions and promise of the matrix. Budding scientists learn particular ways of seeing, usually by studying textbooks written by the skilled practitioners of their paradigm, and

are taught by professors who themselves subscribe to it. In turn, other post-empiricist philosophers of science, such as Hesse and Quine, have shown how images, models, and habits of language--in addition to exemplars--lead members of a disciplinary community to apperceive the novel as in some way familiar, as another instance of a well-understood range of phenomena to which already known understandings can be applied or easily adapted. For the logical empiricists, discovery remained an uninvestigatable phenomenon, unclearly related to protocol statements. For post-empiricists, discovery is the process of analogizing the strategies that were successful in the case of exemplars to new phenomena, new "puzzles." Observations are tightly wed to theory, for it is the ability to see a hitherto unexplained problem as a puzzle, as one more instance of the same kind of phenomenon that has been successfully elucidated in other instances, that allows normal science to proceed. In this view, observation without theory, even if possible, could only generate a preparadigmatic science, one bereft of a fruitful research program.

An even more fundamental critique of objectivism originates from the tradition of European phenomenology. For instance, Alfred Schutz's articulation of the structure of intentionality provides a cogent account of how it is we are in-the-world. That which objectivism would unproblematically take as "given" is only transparent because the pre-suppositions with which the "given" is apperceived mutually co-define the possibilities of perception within a life-world. The life-world, like the research community which shares a paradigm, is intersubjectively maintained. It is a Mitwelt, a living with others, resulting from a unique historical determination, developing its own ethnography. The intentionality of the knower is embedded within this

life-world, which in turn provides the implicit support through which acts of knowing take place. Intentionality is a synthetic moment in which knowing and being meet, in which the noetic anticipates that a disciplined and circumspect inquiry into the noematic will elucidate as yet unknown ontological profiles. In a particular instance, these pre-suppositions function peripherally to define a horizon for objectivity. The act of knowing brings into conscious reflection that which is already anticipated by the life-world. Heidegger called this moment one of ereignis, "appropriation" or "enownment." It is the moment in which Being unveils itself, makes itself accessible to a knower. Objectivity, far from being decontextualized, is the act of appropriating through the horizons of one's world. It is to anticipate that one will fulfill an ontological horizon prior to knowing what one will find; anticipation is not determinate, but it is heuristic. Objective observation without the support of a life-world would indeed be akin to that of a neonate, at best a confused sensing of form and color whose meaning or import would remain unclarified, an arbitrary reaching out. With that support, though, it creates the conditions for what Charles Peirce called "abduction," our power to make fruitful guesses because "the human mind is akin to truth" (CP, 7.220).

NOTE: THE FOLLOWING PARAGRAPH CAN BE OMITTED IF TIME IS SHORT.

That objectivity is anticipatory is borne out by a variety of human phenomena in which anticipation in one form or another is the condition of success. Let me cite several of these, arranged on a crude scale from macroscopic to microscopic. Beginning on the level of persons and whole lives, we see anticipation in the role of personal myths, of life-themes, of projects in shaping and giving

coherence to lives, and conversely, of existential psychology as a therapy of choice for cases of despair and anomie, that is, cases in which the person has relinquished their anticipations. A similar kind of anticipation could be found for the functioning of ethical and aesthetic codes, or alternatively, for the projective logics of stereotyping and prejudice. Existential hermeneutics has made problematic how it is that we read action and motivation like texts to interpret, using cultural codes decipher the semiotics of social intercourse into coherent narratives. On the intra-personal level, cognitive science has stressed the part domain-specific conceptual representations play in the acquisition and application of knowledge by experts, and the role of anticipatory schemas and scripts in patterning experience. Moving farther to the non-conscious level, the "new look" studies in the psychology of perception revealed the extent to which subliminal states influence what is believed to have been seen, and we are all familiar with what depth psychology has revealed of the role of particular, habitual ways of patterning experience in controlling overt behavior. On a neurophysiological level, the modeling of computational properties of the nervous system, for instance the work of David Marr, give a physiological basis for the old Gestalt notions of perceptual pregnance; while "readiness potentials," or neural activation occurring <u>prior</u> to stimulation, suggest that the nervous system is neurologically anticipatory, And biologically, consider the types of anticipatory physiological structures and phenotypic behaviors which are coded genetically, which provide a species-specific pre-orientation for the organism to its <u>Umwelt</u>.

I cite these instances to make the point that these phenomena not only embody anticipation, but that their success <u>requires</u> it.

The dangerous fiction of objectivism, that it is desirable to avoid anticipation, destroys the conditions for objectivity. Anticipation is necessary; it will be either an honored guest at the banquet of science, or it will steal table scraps in the kitchen. But it will not go away hungry. Insofar as it is held in disrepute, it becomes a wild card, a divisor by zero, whose unacknowledged contribution can prejudice any result. Inquiry conducted under the illusion that anticipation has been suspended is nihilistic by definition. That that nihilism is popularly celebrated as "value-free science" makes it no less disturbing.

II. Objectivity as passionate

Let us return to Matt's protocol to consider our second theme, that of passion. Recall that for him, only the neonate is properly objective, and all background knowledge as well as all that we could collectively call 'affect' -- ethics, preferences, emotions, mood, values -- are to be avoided. While mainstream philosophy of science would now, I believe, point out to Matt that background knowledge does play a legitimate role in objective inquiry, I think that it would have a much more difficult task in clarifying for him the role that affect plays. It might even agree with him that, as the positivists held, value inquiries are meaningless by definition, and the intrusion of them into scientific discourse can only contaminate the latter. To incorporate the cognitive into anticipation is one thing, but to address the place of affect is something else again.

However, even in formulating this problem, we pre-judge it

through a set of cultural pre-suppositions that indiscriminately lumps together all value categories. The positivists made this prejudice a virtue by seeking the complete separation between fact and value, and though this demarcation has proved to be untenable, the denigration of all value categories continues to haunt our thinking about science. Just as the lingering fiction of objectivism that observer and object are epistemologically separate must be replaced by the reality of their joint complicity in appropriation, so the lingering fiction that all value categories are anathema to science must be replaced by a revised and differentiated understanding of them.

To a limited extent, this has been attempted. Jacob Bronowski, for instance, some 25 years ago pointed out the dependence of science on the democratic values of respect for truth, open inquiry, and free communication and criticism among members of the scientific community, and more recently, Israel Scheffler has argued for recognition of what he calls "cognitive emotions", such as curiosity, and a readiness for surprise. I might also note Piaget's lifelong concern with the affective experience of "felt necessity," which provides the legitimating moment in cognitive advance. But these have been relatively isolated currents in a much larger stream which continues to conceive scientific inquiry in terms of disembedded reason. If we have reluctantly abandoned the ideal of decontextualized reason, reason independent of its life-world, we continue to adhere to the ideal of disembodied reason, reason independent of affect. We need, it seems to me, a way to re-incorporate the affect with the cognitive, while at the same time preserving a legitimate suspicion toward it. Let me try to provide an initial demarcation that I believe to be both necessary and useful of two areas encompassed by the affect, that of "passion"

and that of "emotion."

Speaking roughly, we can say that emotion is that which moves us, that which is identifiable to psychologists through its induction of a state of physiological arousal. The impetus for emotion comes from without, but it activates a powerful response within. When we are caught up in the throes of emotion, our experience is frequently that we have been seized by a power stronger than we intend, that both the stimulus and the response whirl in a frenzy that the cogito at best can witness but not control. In some cases, the cogito may be lost entirely in a "state of abandon;" for Homeric Greece, the power of emotion was seen as so extraordinary that its presence was taken as a manifestation of the divine. Even for us, the force of powerful emotion is regarded with respect, almost with awe. And part of our common knowledge is the danger that mob psychology, that fanaticism and fascism, pose to the exercise of reason. It is affect-as-emotion that corrupts objectivity, that we need to guard against.

But passion, as I intend it here, is significantly different than emotion. The phenomena about which I am passionate invite the manner of approach to them. Passion is simultaneously that to which I am committed, and with respect to which I am passive, patient. My passions are directed toward those areas of experience which, as I appropriate them, guide me in turn. Rather than being swept away, I am observant, cautious, expectant. I manifest a circumspection and care that, in its turn, is rewarded by that which is unveiled.

I would argue that culturally, we have covered over, to our loss, this distinction between passion and emotion by leaving them largely undifferentiated within a global model of affectivity, and relegating the affect to a secondary status below the primacy of cognition. This

covering over is not accidental, but reflects the general thrust of western thought to celebrate the mind and reason at the expense of the body and affect.

One attempt to rehabilitate the sense of passionate, personal commitment in the act of knowing has been Michael Polanyi's discussion of personal knowledge, and it is with a mere mention of it that I here must close. Polanyi conjoins my dual concern with appropriation and passion. Personal knowledge is Polanyi's term for each scientist's individual commitment to discover the truth, a commitment that saves knowing from being merely subjective, willful or wishful in a pejorative sense. At the heart of our ability to acquire knowledge about the world is an indwelling, a living within a life-world that includes a tacit sub-structure which legitimates a particular way of seeing and doing. This indwelling is complemented by a deeply personal sense of how things are, a metaphysic which guides our empirical inquiry.

Objectivity, I would offer, is an act of passionate appropriation. It is, in Polanyi's term, an instance of intellectual passion. Objectivity results from a careful submission to the phenomenon that clarifies what it anticipates. Knowledge is personal precisely because it results from lived-experience, experience fore-shadowed by the guidance of one's interpretive horizon, and unveiled through one's circumspectful approach. So understood, I would maintain that not only is objectivity possible, but that it is a far more common experience, both in and out of science, than we had thought.

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